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AUTHOR Hurlich, Patricia; And Others
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ABSTRACT

While sequencing of speaking turns occurs in both adult and child systems, the adult system is elaborated by nonverbal signaling of speaker/listener roles and is constrained by expectations of speaking turns responsive to a shared topic. Children's speaking turns are not accompanied regularly by nonverbal signals; the speaker role does not require a listener role. Monologue speech elements may occur within the child's turn taking system or outside of it as simultaneous talk. In encounters between child and adult speaking systems the teacher regularly attempts to impose his own dialogue and topic continuation constraints upon the child's more flexible speaking system. Also, the teacher regularly picks up an utterance of the child's monolgue and paraphrases it into a question to which the child again is forced to answer. Presumably through time such systematic adult monitoring will result in the child coming to accept such constraints as part of his own speaking turn system. Likewise, the child will incorporate the adult nonverbal signals and cues. (WR)

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CONVERSATIONAL TURN-TAKING: AN EXAMPLE WITH CHILDREN

By

Patricia Hurlich
Leta Richter
Sigrid Töpfer
Program in Cultural Studies of Education
Department of Anthropology
State University of New York at Buffalo

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This is a preliminary exploration into the ways in which conversational sequencing unfolds between young children and between children and adults. We are hereby addressing ourselves to the issue of turns.

Recent studies of conversation between adults have begun to shed light on the patterned system of "signals, cues and rules" which accompany the speech act. These "signals, cues and rules" have been shown to regularly punctuate conversation, in accordance with the generally orderly progression of speaker/listener role changes.

Our study focuses on the speaking system of child and adult, in particular on child and teacher, and shows how they differ and how they are similar. We will suggest that the adult speaking system is constrained by topic considerations and speaker/listener role expectations, and that the child speaking system is more flexible. We will also suggest that the teacher, by virtue of being in this educational encounter, imposes his own speaking system on the child, thereby monitoring the child into the adult speaking system constraints.

A 4-minute videotape yielded the data on the interaction between a 24-year old male student teacher, a 4-year old girl--named Ann-Marie, and a 3-year old boy--named Teddy.

A short description of the context will bring us closer to the parties: The teacher and the two children sit around a table. The parties have a number of different toys in front of them--dolls, animals, etc. The teacher is facing the camera. The two children are at a 90 degree angle to the camera on the teacher's right. The girl is sitting next to the teacher. Teddy is sitting next to Ann-Marie. Preliminary viewings of the tape segment suggested disorder and confusion in the unfolding of the verbal and non-verbal interaction, interspersed with more orderly dialogue segments composed of teacher questions and child responses.

Much of the talk seemed abrupt and unrelated to preceding and subsequent speaking. The verbal interchange seemed to lack coherence not only in topic but also in the completeness of the utterances. It seemed as if the three parties were often talking at the same time. The children's individual play suggested their minimal involvement in any interactive process.

However, repeated viewings of the tape at both normal speed and slow motion and transcriptions of both verbal and non-verbal behaviors reveals an overriding orderliness in the structure of the interaction. It is this orderliness and the disorderly exceptions to which we now turn.

If we look at the verbal interchange systematically we recognize some patterns of behavior which strike us as being of interest. Most of the verbal interchange does unfold in speaking turns, i.e. alternate turns of talking with no overlap between them. For example, the teacher asks Ann-Marie: "Do you know what this is that you have in your hand, Ann-Marie?" Ann-Marie: "Doctor;" Teacher: "Do you know what doctors do?" Ann-Marie laughs. Teacher: "They help people; and Ann-Marie: "Witchdoctor."

In this example, the speaking turns are accompanied by non-verbal cues and signals which indicate speaker/listener roles as they have been described in the literature. For example, as the teacher talks to Ann-Marie he looks at her at the end of each utterance. Likewise, when Ann-Marie speaks, she looks at the teacher.

However, what is critical here, is that the majority of the speaking turn sequences in our data occur in the absence of such mutual signals and cues. What happens is that the teacher alone continues his non-verbal signaling behavior, but the child does not attend to these signals. In fact, the child's speaking turn system appears to have no consistent non-verbal signaling

behavior at all. It also appears that the child does not enact the speaker/listener role vis-à-vis the teacher. Yet, orderly speaking turns continue.

An example for this is when the teacher asks Ann-Marie: "Could you tell me what this letter is?" And Ann-Marie responds: "O." Teacher: "O." Ann Marie: "P." Teacher: "P." Teacher: "And what color is the stop sign?" Ann Marie: "Red." Teacher: "Right, is it red like this?" In this example, the teacher looks at the child after each question. However, the child does not reciprocate his gaze. Instead, the child pays full attention to the toy in her hands--yet, orderly speaking turns continue.

In these first two examples (about the doctor and about the stop sign), the speaking turns unfold around a shared topic. It is interesting, however, that the speaking turn patterns can continue with no interruption even when a major topic shift occurs abruptly.

For example, Ann-Marie's answer to the teacher's question, "Is it red like this?" is "Lion," to which the teacher responds, "Right, a lion"--and all this happens in orderly speaking turns.

In contrast to orderly speaking turn taking, the verbal interchange also includes simultaneous talk, i.e. non-turn taking. For example, as the teacher asks Ann-Marie, "You're building a fence to keep the animals in?" Ann-Marie interrupts with, "There's a stop sign there." This example unfolds around a major topic shift, as do all examples of simultaneous talk in our data.

Further, each instance of simultaneous talk by the children seems to be an example of what Piaget has called "Collective Monologue," i.e., talk which refers to one's own activity, and is offered without interest in or checks to assure that the other party is understanding, paying attention, or listening.

In our data this "collective monologue" phenomenon is intimately tied to the individual play activity of each child.

If we now look back to the speaking turn system, it appears that collective monologue elements can also be structured in short speaking turn sequences, as for example when the teacher says to Teddy, "That's blue," and Ann-Marie says, "They're eating outside today." The teacher says, "Teddy?" And Ann-Marie says again, "They're eating outside." OR Another example of a monologue element in a turn system is when the teacher says, "Teddy, could you tell me what you are doing with the trucks?" And Ann-Marie says, "Train." Teacher again says, "Ted?" And Ann-Marie says, "They live outside--they live outside. The baby is in the playpen." Then the teacher says, "Right, in the playpen." We repeat, in these two examples, Ann-Marie's monologue and the teacher's talk to Teddy are sequenced into speaking turns. The progression is orderly and the utterances don't overlap in time.

Comparing the adult speaking turn system with that of the child, we see the following similarities and differences:

1. Both systems have speaking turns as the norm, speaking turns being defined as sequencing utterances in time so that they don't overlap. We infer that this time sequencing is made possible by the parties' recognizing the end of an utterance through various linguistic and paralinguistic features.

2. The adult turn system is further elaborated by patterned non-verbal signaling which accompanies the enactment of the speaker/listener roles. Such signaling is not generally present in the child's speaking system.

3. Turn taking for the adult includes an expectation for topic continuation as connection between the speaking turns, that is, for having a dialogue between the parties involved. The children do not share this dialogue constraint.

4. The child's speaking system includes monologue elements. These monologue elements may occur within the turn taking system, or outside of it as simultaneous talk. By its nature, the monologue is not constrained by topic considerations between speakers.

No listener role is required for the enactment of the monologue. The adult system lacks the monologue element since it violates the rules of shared topic and mutual speaker/listener roles which unfold in neat turn taking.

In summary then, while sequencing of speaking turns occurs in both adult and child systems, the adult system is elaborated by non-verbal signaling of speaker/listener roles and is constrained by expectations of speaking turns responsive to a shared topic, i.e. dialogue expectations.

The children's speaking turns are not accompanied regularly by non-verbal signals; the speaker role does not require a listener role. Monologue speech elements may occur within the child's turn taking system or outside of it as simultaneous talk.

In this encounter between child and adult speaking systems, the teacher regularly attempts to impose his own dialogue and topic continuation constraints upon the children's more flexible speaking system. For example, the teacher regularly asks short, simple questions about the toys, like--what color; what kind of toy, etc. He, thereby, regularly leads the child into a dialogue.

Also, the teacher regularly picks up an utterance of the child's monologue and paraphrases it into a question to which the child again is forced to answer. A typical example of this: After Ann-Marie's monologue, "They're eating outside today--they're eating outside today, they're eating outside,"

the teacher finally picks it up asking, "Are they eating outside, Ann-Marie?" And Ann-Marie answers: "Yah, they're eating outside." Presumably through time such systematic adult monitoring will result in the child coming to accept such constraints as part of his own speaking turn system. Likewise, the child will incorporate the adult non-verbal signals and cues.

This systematic adult monitoring is of obvious interest for the student of educational encounters, and it may be that it gives us some clues to the child's acquisition of other systems, other than conversational sequencing.